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Guest columnist

Building MLK's "beloved community"

By Larry Gossett
Special to The Times

On Monday, the King County Council changed the official county logo from an imperial crown to an image of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the county's namesake.

I believe this symbol appropriately reflects the values and hopes of the diverse population of 1.8 million people who reside within our county boundaries. It is a 21st-century symbol for a 21st-century people.

This new logo will become a constant reminder of Dr. King's goal of building the "beloved community," one in which people commit themselves to working together to solve community problems, no matter how complex, in a fair, democratic, respectful and nonviolent manner. It will reflect the fact that we strive in this corner of the Pacific Northwest to be a progressive, racially tolerant and innovative community.

The prominence — and importance — of such a new symbol is immeasurable. It can be drawn upon as an inspiration to solve all manner of conflict and discord in our community. Dr. King's image will prompt us daily to meet our moral obligation to try to become our better selves by putting the needs of others before our own. It will encourage us to stand up for those being exploited, abused or otherwise misused, even if it means we might lose our friends, job or position.

We are a county unafraid to support reforms that take our government in new directions. For example, we have shifted the focus of our criminal-justice system from detention to prevention. Through the cooperation of the courts, prosecutors, defenders, executive and council, the county implemented a series of "risky" reforms designed to create meaningful and workable alternatives to incarceration.

These changes have led to a dramatic reduction in King County's jail population, slowing of the growth of expenditures necessary to operate our adult- and juvenile-detention centers, and a reduction in the recidivism rate among offenders who participated in alternative programs we created, such as day reporting, mental-health and drug courts, and therapeutic family counseling.

Having Dr. King's image as our logo will only enhance the likelihood that these kinds of inspired



King County

King County's new logo: a 21st-century symbol for a 21st-century people.



Larry Gossett

reforms and collaborations will continue.

In 1986, then-Councilmen Bruce Laing and Ron Sims worked together to successfully change the namesake of our county from an obscure vice president, William Rufus de Vane King, to that of America's best-known civil-rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Until adoption of this new logo, their achievement had largely gone unnoticed, and certainly unrecognized by the majority of the people who live in this county.

For more than two decades, King County's main "acknowledgment" of this historic name change was a plaque with a picture of Dr. King, in the lobby of the King County Courthouse. Many people visiting the courthouse rightfully asked: Why doesn't King County show more respect for the name change and put Dr. King's image in its logo?

After all, the state of Washington and the city of Seattle give visibility to their namesakes by placing images of them within their respective logos. George Washington is in the center of our state's logo and Chief Sealth holds the same distinction for the city of Seattle.

Over the past eight years, I have led a broad-based community campaign, involving thousands of King County residents, in an effort to get the King County Council to give credence and visibility to the fact that the honored namesake of our county is Martin Luther King Jr., by placing his likeness in our logo. After 21 years, it's time to bring our namesake out of hiding and into the light for all to see.

Dr. King was an extraordinary humanitarian who did great things to make our country a better place for all people to live. Because of this, I genuinely believe that in time the citizens of King County will become extremely proud of our new symbol of regional pride.

Larry Gossett is the chairman of the Metropolitan King County Council. He represents Laurelhurst, Fremont, the University District, Capitol Hill, Central Area, Beacon Hill and the Rainier Valley.

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